ISSUE#17

enduro ILLUSTRATED

RED RIOT

REVIEWING BETA'S SUBTLE 2017 CHANGES

FACTORY RACER

STEVE HOLCOMBE'S SEXY BETA RR 300

TAYLOR ROBERT

JOURNEYING THROUGH EUROPE AS AMERICA'S LONE GP RACER

TELLING TALES

CH RACING'S FABRIZIO AZZALIN ON ENDURO GREAT STEFAN MERRIMAN

The Racecraft "Antigua"

Photo: Future7Media

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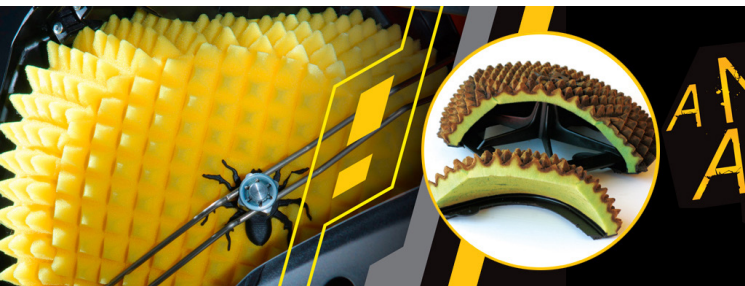
EDITORIAL#17



There's a point in every rider's life where the passage of time starts to have a notable and profound effect. An effect on your body, of course, but also on the amount of time you can spend riding.

Simply, life comes along and other stuff becomes important. Not more important, just other stuff starts to matter. Like needing to pay your own way in life, having to buy your own van. Before you know it you've gone from living and breathing your dirt bike addiction to snatching bits of it between work, wife and before you know it...kids.

We speak from experience of course, while many of you reading this will think, "Who me? Nah, not yet mate." For many though this is the reality. Psychologically the change is immense - you arrive at a race knowing you aren't fit like you used to be. Not fit like you need to be.

So how do you deal with that? You accept it as a good thing, of course. Enjoy the ride still, take it seriously but not THAT seriously any more. Accept that other things are more important. It remains a positive in your life but you gain other positives, which take up more of your time.

Some of the crap you spend time doing when you're younger gets less important with age, at around the same time you start to gain experience. You become more economical with your time because you know what needs doing.

This will happen. Maybe not yet, maybe later for some than others, but it will happen. For the rest of your life you won't be quite as good as you used to be - and all the better for it.

Sure, some riders keep it going for decades. For those who make their living from sport that moment arrives much later than for others. But at some point most of us reach a point where the price of the next big weekend of racing gets weighed-up against the price of the next monthly mortgage repayment.

What's inspired this little ramble of thought? It seems a change is happening right now in enduro circles - bikes, the sport and particularly the riders are rolling over the older generation, kicking them off the bed and making way for a new order. One thing's for sure, it's all good...

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BIG 3

#3.1 GOING PLACES

What a year it's been so far for enduro rookie Nathan Watson. Kicking things off with an overall win at the Italian Enduro Championship opener (his first ever enduro) he then made a solid start to his Enduro World Championship campaign in Morocco. Since then he's gone from strength to strength. Third on each of the first three days of the series, he then placed second on the following six days. Then he really hit his stride. Winning day two in Sweden and both days in Spain Nathan sits five points behind Finn Eero Remes with two rounds to go. Not a bad first season by anyone's reckoning!

Husqvarna
MOTORCYCLES

BIG 3

#3.2 WHITE CHARGER

For 2017 Husqvarna's complete range of two-stroke and four-stroke models gets well and truly overhauled. New two strokes and four-stroke motors, new WP 48 Xplor forks, new bodywork, revised frames and a whole heap of other changes. We'll have a full test in the next issue of Enduro illustrated.

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BIG 3

#3.3 AUSSIE, AUSSIE...

Daniel Sanders – one of the standout performers during the 2015 ISDE and is moving on up into the senior ranks of the Australian Trophy team for 2016. Together with Josh Strang, Daniel Milner and Lachlan Stanford, Sanders will compete in the four-rider Aussie senior team. Winner of the Enduro 3 class last time out in Slovakia, Sanders delivered a gritty, and not always pretty, performance to claim a well-earned winning result. As defending Trophy Team champions Australia will be going all-out to win again.

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Short-term pain for long-term gain, or a result that plunges the UK into a challenging and uncertain future? The UK's decision to leave the European Union on June 24th caught many by surprise, so how's it likely to effect the off-road motorcycle sector?

If nothing else we now know that political upheaval on a mind-boggling scale, and a divided nation, is the result of a vote to leave the European Union. Although it's not the usual Enduro illustrated fodder, Britain plays a big role in the global sport of enduro, particularly within Europe. From race teams, racers, importers and exporters - we couldn't help but wonder WTF is going to happen next?

The most immediate effect post-vote has been a fall in value of the British pound, which is likely to have an immediate impact on the price of bikes, fuel, parts, gear and tyres. But what the long-term effects will be no one seems to know for definite. And quite obviously neither do we.

Like many we're hoping it'll make very little difference in the long term, but figured we'd ask a few key players for their opinions. So we polled a few big hitters from the off-road world to get their take on things - UK manufacturers exporting to the world, European manufacturers importing into the UK, European arms of Japanese manufacturers, UK importers of European bikes and tyres. Plus a Frenchman, living and working in America, exporting products to a global market...

CHRIS WITTER

General Manager, Öhlins Development Technical Centre

"This was a very interesting outcome where many things will firstly need to calm down before developments be allowed to unfold over time. Ultimately the people of the UK were given a vote and this was their decision. We are based in Germany but deal with Sweden, the UK and other nations, so we will have to see how exchange rates are affected and what impact this has on our pricing and cost of operations.

"The UK is a highly important market for Öhlins due to its traditions of motorcycling and sport, so we need to ensure that we still trade with the country, as we do with Switzerland for example which is out of the EU. There is no reason for drastic actions at present but we will of course closely monitor any currency fluctuations and trade negotiations between UK and EU."

MARTIN LAMBERT
PR Manager, Kawasaki Motors Europe

"Everyone understands that Kawasaki operates on a global basis in respect of manufacturing, marketing and sales. For some time Europe has been regarded as a "whole market" by KHI in terms of product requests and development as well as homologation and regulation. The UK leaving the EU will not change this basic principle - in other words KHI will not divert from producing European homologated and Euro4 compliant machines for what they regard as this single market, even if the UK is ultimately not going to be a fully paid up member of the community.

"In terms of things like currency exchange, taxes and tariffs, the UK will have to take each challenge as it comes balancing any apparent commercial advantage against any disadvantages that arise - we have two years as the current published estimate to adapt to this. The over-riding feeling right now is that it is "business as usual" and UK Kawasaki customers and dealers can expect continuity while the business landscape gets used to this momentous news."

MATT WALKER
General Manager, KTM Sportmotorcycle UK Ltd

"Currently there are no plans to change the way KTM operates in the UK, but if the value of the pound devalues significantly then we will have to assess the business and address changes to the market and economic situation when there is a need. But we don't believe that will happen. So there has been no kneejerk reactions to the fact that the UK is leaving the EU and, as the third largest market in Europe for KTM, we are committed to the UK."

KARL RADLEY

Marketing, Yamaha Motor Europe (UK branch)

"At this stage, it's still too early to tell what the full impact of Brexit will be. The main issues we face in the short term are potential uncertainty in the stock markets, exchange rates and the knock-on effect to consumer confidence. Whilst the FTSE100 has already recovered to above its pre-Brexit position, which should help to maintain consumers' confidence in spending, the Pound continues to drop against the Euro and we cannot escape the effects of this on the UK.

"As a branch office of Yamaha Motor Europe we will be working with our colleagues in The Netherlands to continually review our strategies going forward, to ensure that we remain competitive in the market place and a sustainable part of Yamaha's European operation. As a stakeholder in the industry, we will also continue to work closely with the MCI to ensure that we do what we can to safeguard the future of the UK off-road industry.

"Brexit will of course have no effect on the on-going product development in Japan, so we will continue to bring innovation and cutting edge technology to off-road consumers in the UK, as well as fight for championship success both domestically and on the world stage."

JOHN SHIRT

Owner, Gas Gas Motos (UK)

"Brexit will affect us, yes, with regards the exchange rate but we've dealt with it for many years now. I'm no expert but the bad Euro rate will affect us, although hopefully only short term. I believe and hope it will come stronger long term.

"Gas Gas is back in business and the future for the brand is looking good, it will be slow but sure. I have a lot of confidence in the new management who want to 'win on Sunday and sell on Monday'. Gas Gas will hopefully be celebrating two world trials titles soon, which for year '1' is excellent. I'm very positive about the future of Gas Gas and as the Brexit deal is totally out of my control, I'll just roll with it. We've had poor exchange rates before and we've had good ones so fingers crossed things will work themselves out."

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"The people have spoken. Well let's rephrase that, 72% of potential voters have spoken. It means 37.4% have said "Leave", 34.5% have said "Stay" and you guessed it, 28.1% chose to let their future be decided by others. This is democracy in action, real democracy."

"Choosing to believe or not to believe is what makes us free. The majority of British citizens have chosen to believe that their country is better off on its own, and depending on how you look at things, they are right or they are wrong. But in the end nobody should criticise this choice as it is their choice. So it has to be the right choice and everybody should respect that.

"The UK had never desired to have a full integration with Europe anyway, so at least on that level it will not be as complicated to untie the UK from Europe.

"The only problem I see is for the youth of the UK. The vote to "Leave" was really won by the people over 45 years old. It speaks volumes! The youth of UK was massively for remaining in the EU. Culturally, it is quite normal as the old guard had groomed them since birth for a future within Europe. But the old guard changed its mind and handed the youth a now unknown future. Good luck to all affected by this new direction."

GWYN BARRACLOUGH

Owner, Mitas Tyres UK

"Time will of course tell if we have done the right thing, it will be many months before things settle down and we feel the long term effects of the decision made.

"An immediate effect is the exchange rate, I pay for the tyres in Euros and the exchange rate this time last year was very different to what it is now. My June invoice compared to the same month last year is over £1,500 more, give or take a few pence. That's a significant increase in the cost of tyres, in the short term the prices have to be raised."

JOHN LAMPKIN
Owner, Beta UK

"I feel it's too early to say how things might change. At the moment there are a lot of uncertainties. Short term it's going to be a negative situation because the Pound has weakened against the Euro, which results in price increases. As the majority of enduro bikes come from within Europe it's an issue all manufacturers and importers will have to deal with. A worst-case scenario is that Beta bikes will increase by about £200.00. Also, as things stand now importing bikes into the UK from Italy is a very simple and straightforward process, but there's a possibility that might change. I think a lot of people thought that the vote would show that the UK would remain within the EU so the result to leave came as a surprise to a lot of business people. A few years down the line I'd like to think that things will be ok. I believe the UK is a strong trading nation."

AARON TRAVELL
Operations Director, Knox

"Brexit creates a significant challenge for our business, for the Motorcycle industry and the nation as a whole - anyone who says otherwise is either wishful thinking or just telling a rose-tinted story. We are pretty much the only clothing manufacturer of any size in UK with in-house manufacturing and while this on paper sounds good, a lot of raw materials are still imported as the UK doesn't have an infrastructure or network of suppliers anymore.

"The opportunity for an SME exporter like us to trade ridiculously easily with EU nations now is under question, which puts a question mark against some new projects etc. At the moment, all motorcycle protective clothing and equipment is made to the CE standard, which is the same in the UK as it is throughout Europe. When we leave, we'll still need to make products that meet the CE standard, so we can sell them in Europe. If the British government introduces a new set of British standards too, like the old BSi standards for helmets, that would be more hoops to jump through and more expense, potentially pushing prices up.

"Knox is a UK brand with UK manufacturing and we are growing at an extraordinary level, both in export and in the UK. We will continue to drive this growth through innovation, great products that work for the end user and hard work. However, BREXIT may mean we have to peddle harder."

MOTORCYCLE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION REACTION TO

Brexit is, for the UK, the most significant event in its recent history. In a world where political, social and business alliances are increasingly via 'blocs', the UK has presented itself with new opportunities.

Whether these opportunities are converted into strong international advantage is very much down to how both business and government perform in the coming years. The MCIA has a key role in support of its members to grasp the opportunities and will work closely with whatever government emerges.

A key benefit for our sector is that we will have much more opportunity to directly influence how the Government legislates and behaves in relation to the UK motorcycle industry and motorcycling in general.

MCIA will carefully consider economic modelling and ramifications for the medium term to support those of its members who now have a new range of opportunities. For the near term, we continue to be in the EU and current type approval and single market regulation (such as licensing etc) will still affect us. Our trading environment will not significantly change in the immediate future.

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Question marks over what will replace the EU in terms of foreign business and trade relations will take an unknown period to conclude. In the long term, frameworks will be created and a more stable environment will emerge.

MCIA will work closely with the government departments responsible to ensure its members are continually appraised of developing opportunities. In the immediate short term it is to be hoped that a weakened Pound and unpredictable interest rates do not overly damage the sector's positive recovery over recent years.

MCIA will evolve to help its members meet these new challenges, maintain its relations with European bodies and create new ones with other trading blocs. This will ensure that going forward our sector has the knowledge and expertise to ensure members can maximise the unexpected new range of opportunities now presented to the industry.

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▶ NATHAN WATSON

BETA RR 2017

RED RIOT

To find out how different Beta's latest enduro offerings really are Enduro illustrated headed to Tuscany, Italy

Words: Future7Media
Photos: Marco Campelli, Cristiano Morello & Andrea Belluschi

Perhaps we've been a bit spoilt by Beta in recent times. Since they first introduced their RR range with in-house built four-stroke engines back in 2010, they've been coming up with long lists of annual upgrades and introducing new models in a two-year cycle.

In 2011 they were the first to put a 350 four-stroke into production. Two years later they joined the flourishing two-stroke market with two large displacement smokers. And in 2015 they started using fuel injection on their RR 350. It's not for no reason that we were expecting some pretty big things from Beta for 2017.

5mm longer forks with stiffer triple clamps, silver Excel rims, a new digital display, a redesigned fuel cap and a few other upgrades on their four-stroke engines. That's more or less it for the upgrades on the new Betas.

Featuring such a limited number of tweaks it's fair to say the 2017 RRs are the least changed since the beginning of the Italian brand's new era in 2010. There are no jaw-dropping surprises and no shiny new models, at least not yet. Instead, they feature a handful of well-considered upgrades, destined to make Beta's warmly accepted RR line-up even better.

ARE THE 2017 BETAS ANY DIFFERENT?

Simply put, yes... All be it not that different. The most easily noticeable change when riding them is the upgraded Sachs forks. The key word here is progression. No one could be absolutely sure if it's the new oil that Beta's using or the fact that the now longer stroke allows for an improved oil flow, but the result is impressively good.

Providing much-improved progression throughout their travel the new forks better absorb impacts from big hits. A bit stiffer in their initial stroke on the two-stroke models, we found they made the RR 250 and RR 300 a bit more sensitive to smaller bumps or rocks. On the four strokes tough, assisted by the bikes' increased weight, the forks gave a pleasantly soft feeling that allowed the wheels to stay fixed to the ground.

The forks come together with a new set of stiffer triple clamps, which are also 140 grams lighter. In terms of the overall weight of the new models, there's not been any significant reduction other that the clamps. The upgraded suspension package is completed with a slightly changed rear shock. Provided by Sachs the shock now comes with a different high/low speed compression adjustment system, which promises more accurate set-up.

Beta
RACING

THE OPINION DIVIDER

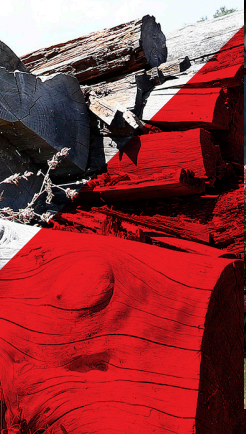
Probably the most talked-about change on the 2017 RR range is the new Excel rims. The new silver Excel rims. With Beta equipping their RR models with black rims since before the start of their new era in 2010, their decision to now go for silver Excels was certainly an opinion divider.

As soon as the first images of the new RRs appeared online people started offering up their opinions, which mostly stated that the silver rims were a step back for the Italian manufacturer. Asked to provide an explanation as to why Beta decided to make the change,

Head of R&D Stefano Fantigini added another point of view to the debate – stating that the silver rims give a lighter look to the new bikes.

The new silver Excel rims might not be to everyone's taste, but they've proven their high quality and durability time and time again in the past. Plus there's less chance of a rogue tyre lever seriously scratching the back finish when changing tyres.

An upgrade that's warmly accepted on the new RRs is the redesigned digital dashboard. Offering a long list of functions it now also features a battery voltage reading, which promises to be useful to the fuel-injected four strokes and the (electric starter only) Xtrainer. Summing up the changes across the range, the new fuel cap features an integrated bleed valve. As for the new graphics, we'd really love it if Beta would go a bit wild, be recklessly creative. We can't help but think the new RRs deserve a more distinctive look.



THE LAWS OF AT-TRACTION

Starting with a morning session in a rock-littered river before then spending the rest of the day riding some of the best single trails the Tuscan countryside had to offer, the word to sum up the experience on the new Betas was 'traction'. With the dry, hard-packed and stony terrain providing a great testing ground, all the new RRs impressively put their power on the ground, finding traction in places we weren't always expecting them to.

In direct comparison to previous models, the most noticeable difference was on the new RR 350, which features both a new intake and exhaust camshafts. Pulling like a tractor from low-rpm, it refused to stall and always kept moving forward. An overall improved engine performance at low rpm is evident across the four-stroke range, making the big thumpers even easier to ride.

Jumping from one thumper to another things haven't changed that much. The RR 350 is a do-it-all bike that goes a bit flat at higher rpm. That's where its bigger brother the RR 390 steps in, offering a bit of extra fun. The RR 430 is the closest you'd get to a traditional 450, with a bit more of a joyful character. The RR 480 is a machine that'll surprise most riders with just how easy it is to go fast in the woods.

In the two-stroke department, you can hardly miss what a great machine the RR 300 is. As the best-selling bike in Beta's RR range (following the Xtrainer), the big smoker features an engine that performs a lot like a four-stroke. It's got zero aggressive hit, makes the bike feel super light and delivers its power in an impressively tractable way. Using such a great engine as their base, it's no wonder why the likes of Steve Holcombe and Johnny Aubert have so far dominated the Enduro 3 World Championship.

SHIFT
beta

GOOD TIMES AHEAD

Sticking to the two-stroke RRs, one thing that our trip to Tuscany proved was how well Beta's automatic oil injection system works. Drastically reducing oil consumption and engine smoke, with a full 12 months of use to prove its reliability the system is clearly a step in the right direction. For 2017 Beta's engineers designed an extra kit to fit the system on the Racing models.

Hitting the showrooms in coming October the 2017 Racing models will feature different, closed-cartridge forks along with the usual extra bling to make them more race ready.

Coming from last year's Racing models the engine map switch is now standard on all 2017 models. Offering two selectable positions for dry and wet weather riding, the two available maps make a bigger difference on the two strokes.

If numbers do speak for themselves then Beta is set to experience some good times in the years ahead. Planning to build 18,000 units during 2016 (includes 2017 models), the factory in Rignano sull'Arno has seen its production figures rise by an impressive 30% since last year. All seems to be well on the Beta front... **e**

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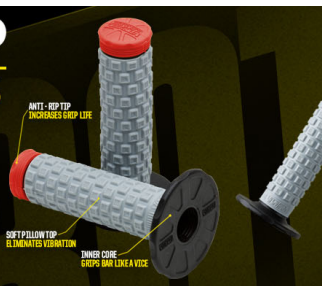

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QUICKFIRE

FRANK SCHROEDER

BETA EXPORT MANAGER

Words: Future7Media / Photos: Beta

With plans to complete their two-stroke line-up with a 125cc machine as well as one or more possible new model unveilings later this year, it's definitely a busy time for Beta...

Mr Schroeder, is it fair to say the 2017 RRs are the least changed models since the beginning of the new era for Beta in 2010?

Frank Schroeder: "At this moment I can only agree with you, yes. But the season isn't over yet, and we may also have some new things coming soon. It might not necessarily be something new within the enduro competition sector, but for sure it's going to be a surprise..."

What were the driving factors behind the decision to limit the upgrades to your 2017 models?

FS: "That's pretty simple to explain. It goes down to the fact that our clients like our bikes and appreciate what we offer. This year with our two strokes we couldn't satisfy all orders. That to us means our bikes are well accepted in the market. Also, for a certain period of time we have to stick with certain engine configurations. It's impossible from a commercial side to change our engines every two or three years. But we do have some surprises coming soon."

Does this mean we could expect something big from Beta at the upcoming EICMA show in November?

FS: "It's still early to be 100% positive about that but maybe yes. For now let's just say that the fact we have not been in Milan last year is a little hint that something big could happen."

Beta

Judging by KTM's decision to replace t non-homologated 125 XC-W, how hard compliant 125cc two-stroke?

FS: "We've already started working on thi it seems to be feasible to have a highly-c two-stroke that would also comply to EU4 were a little bit confused with the decisio discontinue the homologated version of t 200 two-stroke with a non-homologated understand the reason they did it. For us develop such bikes. At the moment we ar and trying to figure out what it actually n we have to complete our range and this is following."

Along with a 125cc two-stroke, one ma Beta's RR range is a 250 four-stroke. A introduce a 250f?

FS: "As I said, we still have the Milan sho moment I can only say that the smaller-d model is a more distant project. EU4 and force us to completely change our Alp mo to design an all-new compact four-stroke versatile enough to be used for both com use."

Beta has also been working on a four-str adventure bike. What progress have you

FS: "For the moment this project has sto to buy an engine from another manufactu kind of motorcycles weren't selling that v version of our RR 480 power plant, but it it to an engine for commuter use. At the r more distant project that our new 125/20 250/350 four strokes."

their 125 EXC with the is it to design an EU4

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In terms of production and sales, what are Beta's plans for 2017?

FS: "We're growing in an incredible way. Within the last two years, we've increased our production by almost 30%. The first 2017 model year bikes will come out of our production line before the end of July. Our plan for calendar year 2016, which includes the 2017 models, is to produce 18'000 units. We believe that is enough to satisfy the need for our products. At the moment there are no more than 55 model year 2016 bikes to be sold in our factory, so there's no need for a blowout sale. These last few models will be sold immediately so we can start selling new bikes very soon."

With Italy being Beta's strongest market, what's the current situation and your goals for expansion in the rest of Europe and the US?

FS: "Italy remains our largest market overall, despite a small reduction in our sales during the last few years. The huge difference is with our exports to other countries. More specifically with the US market, we had a tough start almost 10 years ago but now we're really increasing our sales. Our growth there is by far better than our average 30%. In terms of our turnover, Italy, the US, France and Germany are all on the same levels. In France we sell a lot of 50cc bikes, whereas in the US our clients almost exclusively buy our RR and RS models, along with our trials bikes. Each market has its own needs but overall they all respond to our bikes in a very positive way. I think our sales will continue growing, maybe limited by the production capacities we have in the factory. But that's the same for all our markets worldwide."

Finally, regards individual models what are Beta's best-selling bikes across the entire off-road range?

FS: "Our best seller is by far the Xtrainer. As a matter of fact, within production year 2016 our plan is to produce and sell more Xtrainers than our main competitor's similar bike. Then from our RR range the most successful machine is the RR 300 two-stroke. From our four-stroke range we sell more RR 350s. Our EVO 300 is our best selling trials bike." e

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Christobal Guerrero

GALLERY #17

Words and Photos: Future7Media

This year's Enduro World Championship is all but over. Yet there's everything still to play for, for those battling for title honours. With events in Finland, Sweden, Spain and Italy coming thick and fast, there's been little time to relax. Demanding races full of surprises, when all is said and done it's these mid-season competitions that will have played a decisive role in shaping the outcome of the 2016 series.

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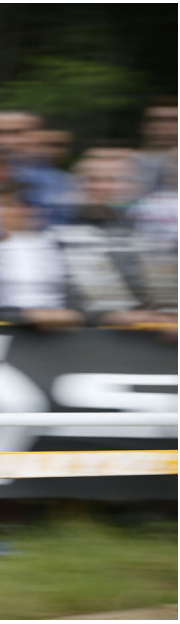
Erik Appelqvist

Steve Holcombe

Taylor Robert

Matthew Phillips

Christophe Nambotin



Mathias Bellino

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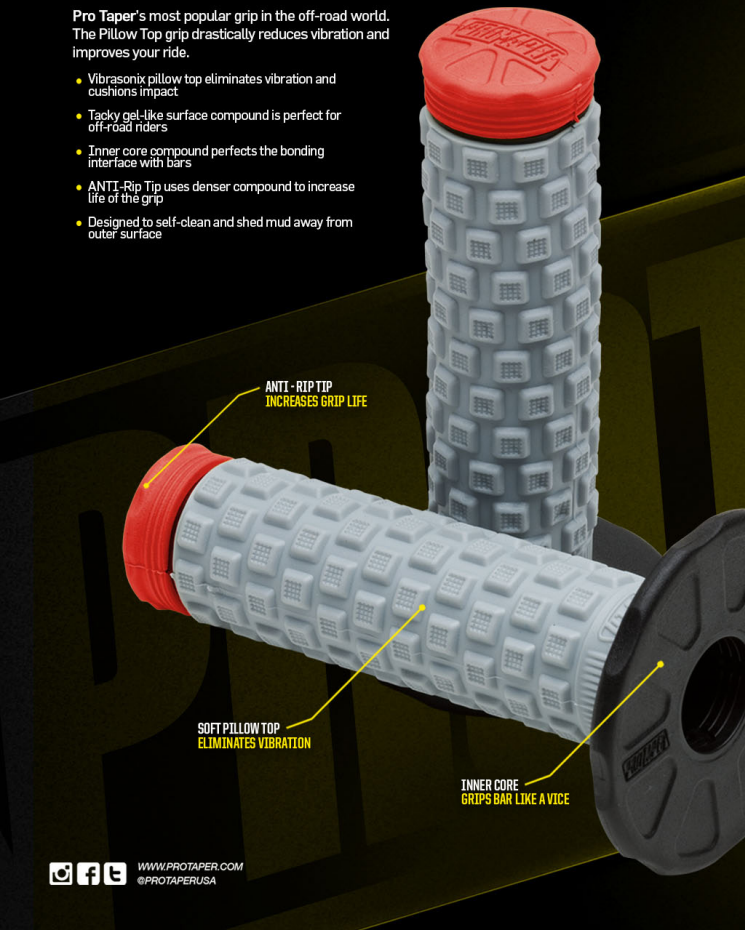

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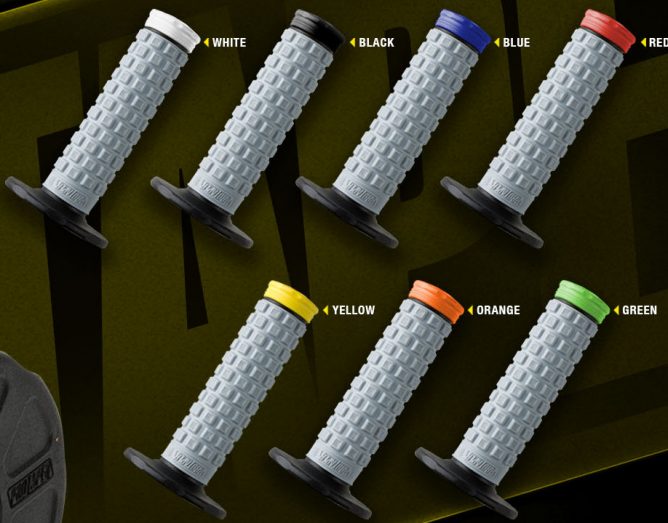

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1-ON-1
TAYLOR ROBERT

Words and photos: Future7Media

KTM factory rider, lone American in this year's Enduro World Championship and one-fourth of the USA's World Trophy Team, set to race in the upcoming ISDE in Spain. Taylor Robert's silky smooth riding style has landed him some impressive results in the EWC so far in 2016, but the Arizona native is hungry for more...

First things first, why the Enduro World Championship in 2016?

"Racing in Europe, in the world championship, is something that I've wanted to do for a while now. When I signed with KTM at the end of 2013 it wasn't clear if I'd get the chance to race in Europe but after last year's ISDE both Fabio (Farioli - KTM world championship team manager) and Antti (Kallonen - KTM North America team manager) approached me and asked if I'd be up for racing the world champs. We got things figured out around December and it's been awesome so far."

It's often said that for Americans racing in Europe is the easy part, it's the living away form home that's tough. How have you found things?

"It's definitely different. I decided not to live in Europe full-time, just because I have great places to ride and a great programme back home in the States, so I'm in and out. The longest I've been over was for six weeks, which was busy but a lot of fun. The travelling takes it out of you but I'm really enjoying it. I spend as much time at the races but it just takes me a little longer to get to some of them. I have a good system now and sleep a lot on the plane. This is a learning year for me. If I'm back in Europe next year I'll have a think about what's the best way to do things."

Let's jump back to the first round of the world championship, in Morocco. Tell us why it's sometimes better not to over analyse things pot race?

"The first round of the world championship was an interesting one. I didn't do quite as well as I wanted to because I wanted to be on the podium. I was half a second from third, which sucked. I know where I lost that time - I got caught in another rider's dust early in the day - and kept going over and over things in my head that night, trying to figure out where I could improve. I think I slept for no more than to hours and was exhausted the next day. If I could go back I know what I'd change, but in general it was a good start to the series."

ACERBIS
33
FARIOLI
KTM

LEE
DESIGNS

If someone had told you 12 months ago that you'd get your first EWC class win in the mud would you have believed them?

"Ha, no way. I just went with it in Portugal. I rode my best in conditions that weren't really that well suited to me. I got third on day one, which I was happy with, but knew I could go better. I didn't make any big mistakes and that made the difference. In some ways I surprised myself but thinking about it now I'm a pretty good all around rider. It wasn't a muddy forest race, there weren't any slippery tree roots to catch you out, but it was certainly wet. Winning the E2 class on day two was awesome."

There's been no shortage of muddy conditions in the world championship this year. Has the amount of work that needs to be put in for wet races surprised you?

"Adjusting to and preparing for wet, muddy races is something that I've had to get used to. Prior to this year my enduro experience came from the ISDE, which is a lot of work. But world championship events are so much more work. You do it once, then you do it all over again and again, sometimes with only a few days in between. Each event is a week of work for everyone on the team, maybe a little more. Getting used to everything - adjusting to all the special test walking and preparing myself for more possible rain - learning and staying healthy is what I'm focused on this year."

What are the biggest things you've learned so far this year?

"The biggest thing I learned from the races is just how important the first few tests are each day. You have to be 100% on it from the off. There's no time to wake up or warm up - you need to be fast from the off. Going flat out from the start is so, so important. If you lose time early on it just makes things so much harder. Fast from the start at world championship is different to fast from the start at the ISDE. Away from racing there's so many little things that are different in Europe compared to the States. The beds, the toilets, the languages, the food, there's so much to get used to. Being able to accept that things are different is the most important thing. Being ready for things not being how you expect them, or like them, and not worrying about stuff, is important. Then it's just a case of doing the training and getting on with the racing."

FACTOR
CHRISTOPHE NAMBOTIN
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For those who won't ever get the chance to race in Scandinavia how would you sum up the riding experience in Sweden and Finland?

"Tree roots, stones and tree stumps - the terrain in Scandinavia is definitely gnarly. I feel like it's pretty dangerous. I was scared the whole time, just trying to stop myself from crashing. I never really got confident. The super slippery stuff put me right out of my comfort zone."

Momentum has been seriously building behind America's World Trophy Team effort for several years now. Can the US win the ISDE this year?

"The US team is really looking forward to the event this year. We feel like we have four really solid riders. If we can keep all riders healthy and all bikes running I think we have a really good shot at winning. Each year we've improved and got closer to challenging for the Trophy win, I hope this year is our year.'

There have been a number of US racers compete in the world championship over the years, but only ever one EWC event in the States. Would you like to see some world championship races in the States?

"I don't know why the world championship doesn't seem to want to go to North America. I feel like there'd be a handful of really great riders who would want to compete, which might encourage more Americans to come and race the full series. It's interesting, but I definitely think it would be a good thing. I'm sure there are people who would be willing to put on some races."

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Being a KTM-mounted American in the world championship it's inevitable that some people will make comparisons between yourself and Kurt Caselli. Kurt's legacy has to be important to you, right?

"I looked up to Kurt for a log time. I used to compete against him in off-road races back home and that's really how I got started. Kurt saw me doing well in the WORCS events and pushed me to go do the ISDE. He got me into the junior team in 2010 and was always there to give me ideas and information. I talked with Kurt quite a lot before I signed with KTM, he was always there to help me. It's cool that in a way I'm now doing something that he wanted to do, as well as something I want to do. I feel like Kurt was the one that turned a lot of people on to European off-road racing, and it's cool that I'm able to continue that."

One thing that yourself and Kurt have in common is a very non-American riding style. Is that coincidence or just something you've worked on in order to ride faster?

"I guess I don't have a traditional American style, but I'd like to think it's effective. Honestly, I think a lot of that comes from watching the French guys at the ISDE. I remember Johnny Aubert smoked everyone in Mexico and didn't look like he was going fast at all. He was so, so smooth. Year after year at the Six Days I'd see other French riders doing the same thing so I tried to bring some of that into my riding. If I get so I'm feeling revved-out and out of control, I start making way too many mistakes. I just don't feel comfortable riding that way..." **e**

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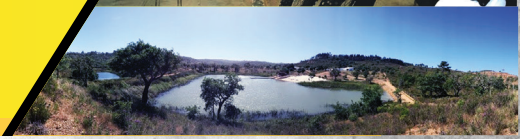

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FACTORY RACER

STEVE HOLCOMBE'S BETA 300 RR

Sandwiched between the four-stroke machines of Matt Phillips, Eero Remes, Mathias Bellino and Nathan Watson at the top of the EnduroGP championship standings is Steve Holcombe's Beta RR 300 - one of only a handful of two-strokes machines inside the top 20 of the Enduro World Championship's overall class...

Words & Photos: Future7Media

Production based. Uncomplicated. A little lighter. Honest and hardworking. Oh, and personalised to suit the preferences of its rider... Beta's official RR 300 machine ridden by Steve Holcombe typifies the majority of bikes within the Enduro World Championship paddock – Simple yet effective.

Holcombe's EWC stead isn't overly flash. That's not being nasty, just being truthful. It's not dripping with titanium or carbon fibre or feature any weird and wonderful parts made specially and specifically just for him. It's a 'lightly revised' and seemingly very close to standard version of the bike that's available to all.

"Honestly, I can say that the modifications to Steve's bike are really nothing special," explains the Beta enduro team manager Fabrizio Dini. "One thing we focus on is giving our riders a bike that they are comfortable on – that means giving the engine and the suspension the character the rider wants.

"The work we do to the engine focuses on the cylinder. We work a little on the cylinder and cylinder head, give the bike a little more compression and adjust the power valve accordingly. The CDI is also a little different, to give Steve the power he likes. And we use a V-Force reed block. The exhaust system is from FMF but we use the 250 silencer on the 300s, which is smaller internally. The throttle response is a little different but it's better on top. We use a Lithium battery for the separate electric starter system, which is one kilogram lighter than standard.

70
AMV
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"Suspension is set like our riders want it," continues Dini. "The 48mm closed cartridge Sachs front forks are the same size as standard but with a different setting inside. Then we use Geco triple clamps, which are a little stiffer than standard but with the same offset. This gives slightly more precise steering. Also, Geco supply a stronger rear brake lever.

"The brake disks are supplied by Galfer. The diameter is the same as standard, but they're stronger. The front disk is designed to offer a slightly softer feeling. The rear disk is a little wider and solid to help cooling.

"Steve likes a low bend of Reikon handlebars, but with spacers under the bars. They're lower than standard."

For Holcombe success has come quickly, and often, in his first year of senior class EWC competition. Something he attributes, in part, to riding a well handling two-stroke. "I feel that riding a two-stroke, at this stage of my career, is absolutely the best thing for me. I think that shows in my results. Moving up into the senior classes of the world championship was a big step for me, so being on a bike that's very similar to what I raced in 2015 just makes things easier.

"The engine is what I love most about the bike. It has amazing bottom-end power, which makes it so, so smooth and controllable in all conditions. I like a motor to be strong and not revvy, which the Beta is. My way of riding is to keep pulling gears and to get the strength of the motor working for me. That also helps the suspension work well, too.

"I guess I like a slightly old school bend to my bars, they're a little swept back, which I find helps with turning. The way the bike handles is also something that helps me a lot. The closed cartridge Sachs forks and Sachs shock work really well – it's probably the most comfortable I've ever been on a bike. The one thing I've learned at world championship level is that you have to be comfortable with your bike set-up, and know how it will react at all times. I think I run my suspension softer than a lot of riders, and there are times when it bottoms out, but I know how the bike reacts in all situations.

"I've got complete confidence in what I'm riding, which I think is the most important thing. I know it's a big part of getting the results I'm getting. I feel like a good all-round enduro set-up is a question of compromise – maybe not the absolute best in every conditions, but in general I know that I have a great package that worked as well in the dry, rocky conditions in Morocco as it has in the mud in Portugal and the stones and tree roots in Sweden..."

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SPROCKETS
RJM

Beta
FACTORY
RJM
X-TECH

BIKE: BETA RR 300
RIDER: STEVE HOLCOMBE
TEAM: BETA ENDURO FACTORY TEAM

ENGINE

Engine modifications: Cylinder and cylinder head work carried out by Beta factory, FMF exhaust, Vertex piston and V-Force reeds.
Piston: Vertex
Exhaust: FMF, 250cc silencer
Crankshaft: Standard
Transmission: Standard
Ignition: Standard
Spark Plug: NGK
Clutch Basket: Standard
Flywheel weight: Standard

CHASSIS

Front brake: Nissin, Galfer disk
Rear brake: Nissin, 5mm thick, solid Galfer disc
Triple clamps: GeCo Specials Parts, standard offset
Bars: Reikon
Levers: Standard
Grips: Reikon
Handguards: Racetech
Fuel Tank: Standard
Plastics/bodywork: Racetech
Air Filter: Twin Air
Radiators: Standard
Sump guard: Beta factory
Chain guards: TM Designworks
Sprockets & gearing: ZF Sprockets, 13-49
Rear Wheel: Standard, 18' rim (black)
Front Wheel: Standard 21' rim (black)
Tyres: Metzeler (rear). Metzeler (front)
Suspension: Forks - Sachs 48mm, closed cartridge
Suspension: Shock - Sachs
Suspension linkage: Standard
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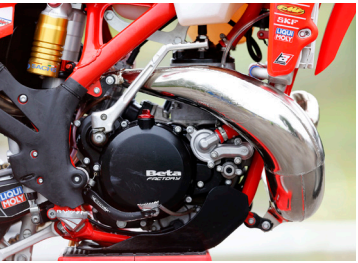

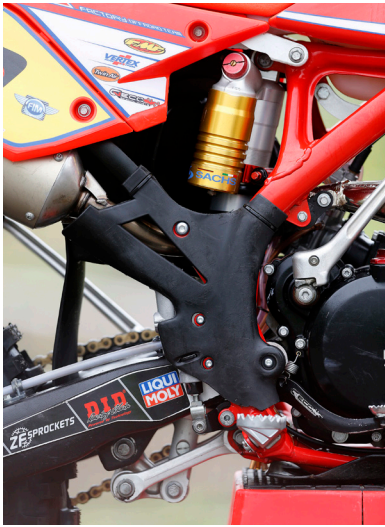

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TELLING TALES

STEFAN MERRIMAN

By Fabrizio Azzalin

There aren't many of the world's top enduro racers that CH Racing team manager Fabrizio Azzalin hasn't worked with over the years. But few have had a more profound impact on the jovial Italian than Australian Stefan Merriman. Signing the then little-know rider back in 2008, 'Azza' soon learned just how much of a special, unique and adaptable talent he truly was...

Words & Photos: Future7Media

"I'll never forget the first few weeks Stefan spent in Italy, at the start of what would be a 10-year career in both Europe and the Enduro World Championship. The first time I saw him race was the ISDE in Italy in 1997, and I think maybe one Italian championship race before that. Each year I like to try and have one 'joker' within my team – a rider that is new to enduro, one that doesn't have experience of enduro, but one that I hope will become a great rider. In 1998 Stefan was the CH Racing Husqvarna team's joker rider.

"In the team at that time were many experienced riders and we knew, more or less, how they would perform. It was February when Stefan arrived from Australia. We went to collect him from the airport and he was wearing shorts. It's cold in Italy in February.

"He was living at my place then and having flown half way around the world we were expecting him to relax for a few days. You know, to settle in, get to know things a little, and to get over the flight. His bike wasn't ready, as we didn't think we needed it to be straight away. We had planned to go riding with the rest of the team riders later that day and Stefan decided to come with us. We went to a motocross track.

"Jarno Boano – now team manager of the Beta Boano enduro team – was our top rider in the 250cc two-stroke class at that time. His race bike was ready, and he, so we thought, was ready for the year ahead. I don't remember why but in one of the vans we had a bike from Husqvarna that had been used for homologation purposes. It had indicators, a horn, all kinds of crazy restrictions, and of course soft, standard suspension. It was a complete non-race bike. A bad bike, which Stefan decided to ride that day.

“We thought he was dead. He was lying, not moving, and after just one week in Italy we thought that everything was already over...”

“Each year I like to try and have one ‘joker’ within my team – a rider that is new to enduro, one that doesn’t have experience of enduro, but one that I hope will become a great rider. In 1998 Stefan was the CH Racing Husqvarna team’s joker rider...”

“Stefan got on the bike and almost from cold went as fast as the bike would go. After two laps he was three, four or five seconds a lap quicker than Jarno, but he just kept riding. He stopped only for fuel. We thought he wanted to get on the bike just to start to build some kind of feeling, maybe to help him get rid of the jetlag. But he raced for 45 minutes absolutely full gas. That’s what he did all day – raced for 45 minutes, stopped only for fuel, and then went back onto the track for another 45 minutes. It was incredible.

“He had a really strange style at that time as he was always standing. None of us were expecting what we saw. But we realised then, everyone did, that he was something special. He showed us his potential.

“Because of his style, always, always, standing, he had some problems with crashing and with hitting his head. If he lost the front wheel coming into a corner the first thing to hit the ground was his head because he was never sitting with his leg out. After just one week in Italy he crashed, and we thought he was dead.

“We went into the mountains that day and I remember that after a downhill he started to accelerate, caught a rock, crashed hitting his head, and that was that. We thought he was dead. He was lying, not moving, and after just one week in Italy we thought that everything was already over.

“He completely lost his memory, we had to take him to a trauma hospital, and for 10 days he was completely out of it. What the hell should we do? Stefan was alone with us and didn’t remember anything. He was always cold so we put three or four sweatshirts on him and sat him in the workshop. We didn’t know what to do with him so Mauro, one of our mechanics, came up with the idea of trying to get his brain working again. He took his big box of carburettor jets – a very big box after many years of running the team – and emptied it in front of Stefan. He asked Stefan to sort all the jets according to their size. And that’s what Stefan did until his mind started working properly again. Thankfully, after two weeks he started to ride again and afterwards things improved.

"Year after year Stefan improved and learned more and more. He realised he wasn't fast enough in the mud so he went to Wales and trained in the mud until he was fast. When he realised he wasn't fast enough in the sand so he went and trained in sand. He always really wanted to improve. He was extremely talented, but he also worked incredibly hard to be the best he could be. In terms of wanting to achieve something Stefan was the most professional rider I have ever worked with.

"My favourite race with Stefan was the world championship in Italy in '99. He won both days on the 360cc two-stroke. He was unbelievable. But we lost the championship that year because he crashed again in Finland and banged his head.

"Stefan is unique because he is one of the few guys that can ride any bike, maybe the only rider. He can race a 125cc two-stroke or a twin-cylinder Aprilia and win. He learns how to understand a bike. The bikes Stefan used during his first years with us no one else could use, not even to go and buy a loaf of bread from the local shop. He liked his bikes set-up in a way that was completely different to all other riders. It worked for him so we realised that there was no point in trying to convince him otherwise.

"Stefan could have won more titles than he did, but I enjoyed several years working with him. Every year no matter what bike he raced, he was fast. But his first years in Europe were the best…"

"He was extremely talented, but he also worked incredibly hard to be the best he could be. In terms of wanting to achieve something Stefan was the most professional rider I have ever worked with..."

Fabrizio Azzalin...

'Fabri' has been running the CH Racing enduro squad since 1999, firstly as Husqvarna's official Enduro World Championship team and now championing Sherco with star rider Matt Phillips. During the past 20 odd years he's enjoyed good times, winning titles with the likes of Anders Eriksson, Kari Tiainen and Samuli Aro, and of course Merriman, but also endured difficult times due largely to Husqvarna's financial troubles under then owner Claudio Castiglioni. A hugely passionate individual who's never shy to speak his mind, Azzalin was the man who gave Merriman his big break in Europe.

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Managing Editor: **Jonty Edmunds**
Jonty@future7media.com

Advertising Manager: **Alex Waters**
Alex@future7media.com

Designed by: **Ian Roxburgh / Design 147**
Ian@Design147.co.uk

Contributors: Jon Pearson, Robert Lynn, Andreas Clavas, Andrea Belluschi, Sebas Romero, Marco Campelli, KTM Media Library

Not big changes, but changes that do make a difference. Adopting an 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' approach for 2017 Beta have focused on subtle tweaks that improve handling, rather than changes for changes sake. Their new RR models might not be 'all-new' but come the end of the year the Italian manufacturer might just have a few surprises for us...

EVENT: Beta 2017 RR launch
PHOTO: Cristiano Morello

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